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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the development of conflict between sexual minority identity and religious identity in sexual minority youth, examining religion as both a risk factor and a protective factor. Intrinsic religion was expected to predict self reported conflict between religious and sexual minority identity. Retrospectively reported homophobic content of childhood and adolescent religious socialization messages was expected to predict factors related to identity conflict, although individual intrinsic religion was expected to interact with or mediate that relationship. Thirty-three religiously and racially diverse sexual minority college undergraduates participated in this study. The data confirmed the hypotheses. Intrinsic religion predicted belief in the immorality of homosexuality, but was not significantly correlated with any other measure of internalized homophobia. Although intrinsic religion predicted self reported conflict between religious identity and sexual identity, belief in the immorality of homosexuality entirely mediated this effect. Homophobic content of childhood and adolescent religious socialization messages predicted anti-religious attitudes, but intrinsic religious mitigated against this effect. Although homophobic religious socialization messages put sexual minority youth at risk for higher levels of internalized homophobia, an intrinsically motivated religious commitment works simultaneously as a protective factor, buffering youth against some of the negative consequences of internalized homophobia. (Contains 24 references.) (JDM)

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Intrinsic Religion and Internalized Homophobia in Sexual-Minority Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the development of conflict between sexual-minority identity and religious identity in sexual-minority youth, examining religion as both a risk factor and a protective factor. Intrinsic religion (Allport & Ross, 1967) was expected to predict self-reported conflict between religious and sexual-minority identity. Retrospectively reported homophobic content of childhood and adolescent religious socialization messages was expected to predict factors related to identity conflict, although individual intrinsic religion was expected to interact with or mediate that relationship. Thirty-three religiously and racially diverse sexual-minority college undergraduates participated in this study. The data confirmed the hypotheses. Intrinsic religion predicted belief in the immorality of homosexuality, but was not significantly correlated with any other measure of internalized homophobia. Although intrinsic religion predicted self-reported conflict between religious identity and sexual identity, belief in the immorality of homosexuality entirely mediated this effect. Homophobic content of childhood and adolescent religious socialization messages predicted anti-religious attitudes, but intrinsic religion mitigated against this effect. Although homophobic religious socialization messages put sexual-minority youth at risk for higher levels of internalized homophobia, an intrinsically motivated religious commitment works simultaneously as a protective factor, buffering youth against some of the negative consequences of internalized homophobia.

Introduction

Internalized homophobia, (Malyon, 1982; Mayfield, 1999), is the internalization of the homophobic and heterocentric values of society by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning people. It has been consistently associated with negative developmental and mental health outcomes in sexual-minority youth and adults, including "negative therapeutic reaction" or a view of the self as incurably mentally ill (Friedman & Downey, 1995), social isolation from peers (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996), self-alienation from family (Waldner & Magruder, 1999), and high risk behavior with regard to HIV (Meyer & Dean, 1995). Some Christian organizations work to promote homophobic values and prevent tolerance and acceptance from entering the dominant discourse (Irwin, 1997; White, 1994).

Religion is associated with homophobia on the individual level (Herek, 1987), but work that conceptualizes religious expression multidimensionally (Fulton, Maynard, & Gorsuch, 1999) provides evidence of differential association with homophobia of different types of religious expression. One particular construct, intrinsic religious orientation (Allport & Ross, 1967) consistently predicts positive patterns of coping with life stressors, such as sexual assault (Doxey, Jensen, & Jensen, 1997; Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998; Miner & McKnight, 1999). However, intrinsic religious orientation predicts homophobia as well (Herek, 1987). To further complicate the issue, this is not because of an independent direct effect of intrinsic religion itself, but because of the high correlation between intrinsic religion and belief fundamentalism, or strict adherence to specific beliefs and unwillingness to consider belief-discordant ideas (Fulton et al., 1999; Kirkpatrick, 1993; McFarland, 1989). Therefore, intrinsic religious orientation in sexual

minorities presumably has a complex relationship with internalized homophobia, with components that both attenuate and exacerbate its relationship with religious/sexual identity conflict.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the development of conflict between sexual-minority identity and religious identity in sexual-minority youth. This work conceptualizes religion-based homophobia ecologically (Bronfenbrenner, 1977); that is, as the product of the interaction between religious socialization messages and aspects of the individual's religious expression (Allport & Ross, 1967; Fulton et al., 1999) and not as a necessary consequence of religiousness. Therefore, the goal of this work is not to examine whether or not religion is predictive of internalized homophobia, but what aspects of religious and spiritual socialization are predictive of internalized homophobia, and how do characteristics of the individual mediate or interact with those socialization factors.

Hypotheses

Given these goals, this work tests two hypotheses. The first is that intrinsic religion, because of its associations with belief fundamentalism, predicts conflict between religious identity and sexual-minority identity in sexual-minority youth, but only through the internalization of homophobic socialization messages that are conflated with religion. The second is that homophobic socialization messages directed at sexual-minority youth produce anger and bitterness toward religion, but intrinsic religious commitment attenuates this effect.

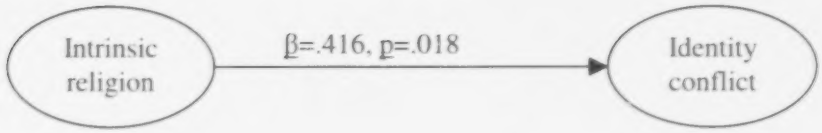
Method

The principal investigator recruited college undergraduates (age range 18-25) for a larger study on religious socialization. Only the data for participants who identified as questioning, who did not use a label for their sexual orientation, or who identified as sexual minorities (n=33) was used to test these hypotheses. Participants completed both a questionnaire and an interview with the principal investigator. The questionnaire measured intrinsic religion (α=.89) according to the measure currently in use in the field (Gorsuch, 1994), and religion-based homophobia (α=.92) and anger/bitterness toward religion (α=.93) according to measures developed specifically for this study. The questionnaire also measured degree of identification as a sexual minority (for purposes of parsimony, various self-labels for sexual identity were collapsed either unlabeled/questioning, or lesbian/gay/bisexual). The questionnaire also contained a measure of internalized homophobia (Mayfield, 1999) with three factors: personal homonegativity (α=.85), immorality of homosexuality (α=.79) and gay affirmation (α=.77). The interview asked for retrospective reports of homophobic religious socialization messages from childhood and adolescent religious organizations, and self-reported conflict between religious and sexual-minority identity.

Results

The data supported the hypothesized link between intrinsic religion and identity conflict (β=.416, p=.018; R^2=.145, p=.018; see Figure 1).

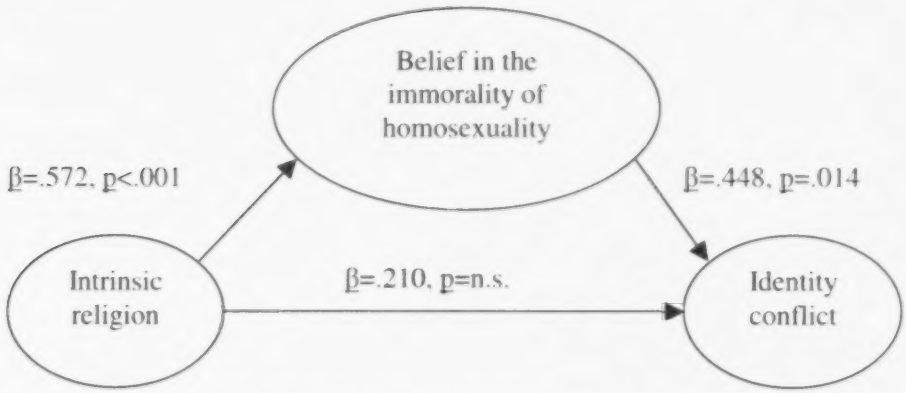
Figure 1: The effect of intrinsic religion on identity conflict



Adjusted R^2 = .145, p = .018

Testing religion-based homophobia and the three measures of internalized homophobia as mediators of this relationship revealed one mediation effect with immorality of homosexuality. In this model (Figure 2), intrinsic religion predicted belief in the immorality of homosexuality (β=.572, p<.001) which, in turn, predicted identity conflict (β=.448, p=.014), but the independent direct effect of intrinsic religion was non-significant. In a hierarchical analysis, the mediational model represented a significant improvement over the model with only the overall effect (R^2 change = .158, p = .014).

Figure 2: The effect of intrinsic religion on identity conflict, mediated by internalized homophobia



Adj. R^2 = .285, p = .003. R^2 change from previous model = .158, p = .014.

The data also supported the hypothesized interaction effect between homophobic socialization messages and intrinsic religion on anger and bitterness toward religion. With homophobic socialization messages of both the childhood (b=.216, p=.058) and adolescent (b=.554, p=.031) religious organization, degree of identification as a sexual minority (b=.763, p=.011), and intrinsic religion (b=-.352, p=.004) entered as predictors of anti-religious attitude (R^2 = .585; see Table 1), there was a significant negative interaction effect between intrinsic religion and homophobic socialization messages of the adolescent religious organization (b=-.261, p=.001).

Table 1: Predictors of anti-religious attitude in sexual minorities

Variable	B	t	p
Childhood religious organization's negative attitude toward homosexuality	.216	1.970	.058
Adolescent religious organization's negative attitude toward homosexuality	.554	2.270	.031
Degree of identification as a sexual minority	.763	2.735	.011
Intrinsic religious orientation	-.352	-3.134	.004
Interaction: Adolescent religious organization's negative attitude toward homosexuality with intrinsic religious orientation	-.261	-3.579	.001

Adjusted R^2 = .585

Discussion

Overall, the results support the hypothesized dual-role of intrinsic religion as both a risk and as a resilience factor. Intrinsic religion predicts identity conflict, but only because of the maladaptive beliefs about homosexuality that tend to be socialized along with it. Intrinsically religious sexual minorities can draw upon their internalized religious

belief system to accept or reject socialization messages based on their own knowledge of what they believe to be the Truth (Yip, 1996, 1997). Further, although intrinsic religion is associated with homophobia, it is also associated with greater use of religious coping mechanisms that are known to be useful for making sense of experiences that are at the boundaries of individual understanding (Mattlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990; Pargament et al., 1992; Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1993) such as terminal illness, death, and, by extension, oppression. Therefore, it is understandable that the independent direct effect of intrinsic religion, over and above that of exposure to homophobic socialization messages, is to ameliorate the anger and bitterness that arises from negative experiences with religion.

According to these findings, religion is not a risk factor for the development of sexual-minority youth in and of itself. Rather, it is the homophobia that is conflated with religious in some contexts that causes religion-based internalized homophobia and its associated developmental risks, and this effect is exacerbated by the lack of an intrinsic commitment. These findings indicate that the religious development of sexual-minority youth is best conceptualized from a Differential Developmental Trajectories perspective (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000) which assumes that different subsets of youth will undergo different developmental processes based on both ecological and internal factors. In this case, intrinsic religiousness and the presence and strength of a homophobic undercurrent in childhood and adolescent religious socialization messages determine whether any given youth will have a positive or negative experience with religion. The question for further research is not whether religion leads to internalized homophobia in gay youth, but under what circumstances will it cause problems, under what

circumstances will it lead to more adaptive coping, and what variables mediate this relationship.

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